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Intelligence Redux: *Kissinger's Coup*

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Early in 1969, not long after he had assumed the post of National Security Adviser to President Nixon, a displeased Henry Kissinger sat in his White House office reading a current CIA National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). With obvious disgust, Kissinger finished reading the document, and in large letters, wrote across the top of it, "Piece of crap!"

Of such little events are major controversies often made, and that angry little scrawl by Kissinger turned out to be only the opening shot in what finally became a bloody bureaucratic battle in which American intelligence was the battleground. Ultimately, dozens of careers were ruined, the intelligence community became bitterly politicized, and American intelligence suffered an unprecedented crisis of confidence. Indeed, the effects of that battle are still being felt today in the American intelligence community, which has never quite recovered.

In this series of articles on the problems of American estimative intelligence, we have taken some pains to point out the debilitating effect of politics (and its handmaiden, bureaucratic politics) on the intelligence process. From the first Soviet atomic bomb test through the Cuban Missile Crisis to the great anti-ballistic missile debate of the 1960s, the invidious effect of politics can be seen again and again. It is possible from this, in fact, to postulate a **First Law of Intelligence: Where Politics Tread, Intelligence Becomes Oatmeal.** Not very inspiring, perhaps, but it makes the point.

Which brings us to Henry Kissinger—or, more accurately, a period during which American intelligence became so politicized, it can scarcely be said it even functioned, certainly not as it was designed to do. In a sense, of course, the politicization was inevitable, given the fact that from the first moment he assumed office, Kissinger sought (and very shortly accomplished) total domination of American strategic policy, mainly because he wore two hats—chief security adviser to the President and chief progenitor of American foreign policy.

That is the sort of anomaly guaranteed to cause trouble, and there was trouble very early on. First, there was the problem of the Nixon administration's stated goal of an "era of negotiations," meaning that both Nixon and Kissinger had set strategic arms control agreements, among other bilateral goals, as the first foreign policy priority. There was an intelligence implication in such a policy, since any agreements had to carry a vital prerequisite: verification. And verification itself was a political code word meaning that the American military and certain members of Congress would not buy any bilateral agreement without a firm guarantee that we would be able to detect any cheating by the Soviet Union. Was the CIA up to this task?

Of course, argued CIA Director Richard Helms, but he was disquieted by the question. An old hand at Washington infighting, Helms was perfectly aware of the fact that the last thing he wanted the agency to get involved in was the political minefield of verification. As Helms realized, it was a no-win proposition: If the CIA agreed that verification was feasible, then it risked angering congressional conservatives who felt that the Soviet Union would never live up to any arms agreement. On the other hand, if the CIA dragged its feet on the verification question, then it risked incurring the wrath of Kissinger (and by extension, his boss). The CIA already felt uneasy with Kissinger, whom it suspected (correctly) of wanting to create his own intelligence organization more subject to his ▶